

The RAAF's Frozen Middle Part Two

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The concept of the "frozen middle" has become a common phrase in the business world, and it refers to the group of middle managers who are often resistant to change. These managers are known to be stuck in their ways, resistant to new ideas, and hesitant to take risks. The frozen middle is a significant problem for many organisations such as the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), as it hinders innovation, slows down decision-making processes, and stifles progress. To understand how the frozen middle can impact organisational efficiency, it is essential to explore why this phenomenon exists and how it can be addressed. In my previous post I used Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as a lens to describe a possible reason why the problem exists (Williamson, 2023). In this post, I will provide an alternative explanation from a cognitive lens.

In the RAAF, a middle manager may often feel the pressure to multitask in order to keep up with the demands of our busy organisation. The position of middle management is major filtering and translating point of information from executive management down and to the workers and back up. In addition to the up-down information flow, Senior Non-Commissioned Officers (SNCOs) also work in positions that require lateral transfer and filtering of information, leading to multitasking.

Multitasking, or the ability to perform multiple tasks simultaneously, has become increasingly common in SNCO's, but it is not without its consequences. In fact, research has shown that multitasking can lead to performance degradation, which can ultimately affect our productivity, decision-making abilities, and overall well-being.

The human brain is not designed to handle multiple tasks simultaneously (American Psychological Association, 2006; Foerde, et al., 2006). Instead, it is designed to focus on one task at a time, allowing us to process information more efficiently and effectively (American Psychological Association, 2006; Rubinstein, et al., 2009). When we try to divide our attention between multiple tasks, our brain must constantly switch back and forth between the different tasks, which can lead to a phenomenon known as cognitive switching cost (American Psychological Association, 2006; Foerde, et al., 2006; Rubinstein, et al., 2009).

Cognitive switching cost refers to the time and effort required to switch between tasks. When we switch from one task to another, our brain needs to disengage from the first task, process new information related to the second task, and then re-engage with the new task. This process can take a significant amount of time and effort, which can lead to performance degradation.

One study by the American Psychological Association (2006) found that multitasking can reduce productivity by as much as 40%. The study also found that multitasking can increase the likelihood of making mistakes and can lead to poorer decision-making. In addition, multitasking can have negative effects on our ability to learn and retain information, which can ultimately impact our long-term memory (Foerde, et al., 2006).

The negative effects of multitasking can also impact our emotional well-being. When we try to divide our attention between multiple tasks, we are less able to connect with the people around us and form meaningful relationships (Rosen, et al., 2013). This can lead to feelings

of loneliness and isolation, which can have a negative impact on our mental health (Rosen, et al., 2013). Suggesting that SNCO's aren't lacking motivation or are risk adverse, they may be emotionally spent and have decision paralysis (American Psychological Association, 2006; Bruck, et al., 2015; Rosen, et al., 2013).

I once had the opportunity to work with some senior members of the ADF and one notable difference was the tidiness of their offices. Also, having another member to manage their time and peripheral tasks seemed to make them more productive. In addition to this experience I recently had the opportunity to learn from a CEO of a company that had an annual revenue of over 100 million dollars. I naively assumed in business, money was time. However, the lesson I took from him was progress made where attention is paid. To me this meant, limiting distractions may be a potential solution for the "frozen middle."

In conclusion, the concept of the frozen middle is a significant issue for our organisation as it can hinder innovation, slow down decision-making processes, and stifle progress when staying a head of the competition is life or death. As new perspectives on the same problem can yield different results, this post presents an alternative explanation from a cognitive lens. Multitasking, a common practice in middle management, can lead to performance degradation, affecting productivity, decision-making abilities, and emotional well-being. Cognitive switching cost is a significant factor in this, which is the time and effort required to switch between tasks, leading to decision paralysis (American Psychological Association, 2006; McFarland, 2010). By limiting distractions, middle managers could improve their productivity and overall well-being, thus breaking the frozen middle phenomenon. It is essential for our organisation to understand the causes of the frozen middle and take steps to address them, which can lead to increased innovation, improved decision-making, and overall success.

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